

2 May 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

A recent article in *The New York Times* pinpointed one of the subtler side effects of this lengthy pandemic. Its cause is not what we usually mean by 'long Covid', those debilitating symptoms afflicting people long after they've 'recovered' from the virus.

It's the deepening effect of statutory seclusion on our mental well-being. It's called 'languishing'.

Languor and Ennui

"Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness," says the article. "It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield."

I recognise these symptoms. I used to call them 'Tuesdays'. But I'd have thought my introverted inclinations would have better prepared me for lockdown life.

I don't mind my own company, the society of 'me, myself, and I'. I enjoy solitude and a chance to commune with my private thoughts and inner life. But the 'languishing' recently set in like a heavy hangover. Maybe you feel it too.

Introverts aren't *shy*, by the way. Neither are they socially awkward. We enjoy social interactions as much as extroverts do, as long as they're *meaningful* interactions.

Even so, the introvert may slip away from a party surreptitiously, hoping against hope to dodge the extrovert's scolding for 'leaving too early'. Why? Because the introvert's battery is 'empty'. It needs re-recharging, like a phone. "Where'd you go?!" the extrovert asks the next day.

Why the fatigue? Where did all our mental energy go? The extroverts plugged themselves into us and sucked it right out of us, the way vampires feed on their victims. That's where it went. What drains me recharges them. Parties pump them up.

This is why extroverts dragoon introverts into their pursuit of the crowd's cacophony. "You've *got* to come! The whole gang will be there. It'll be great. What's *wrong* with you? Are you a loner and loser?"

No. *Solitary* pursuits recharge the introvert, that's all. Introverts understand this about themselves. Introverts understand the extroverts, too. But I don't think the reverse is true.

Still, if that were all there is to this current affliction called 'languishing', I ought to be bursting with mental vitality. My battery should be more than fully recharged after fourteen months of pandemic life. Only the extroverts should be 'languishing'. So why, lately, does every day feel like 'Tuesday'?

The article goes on: "Part of the danger is that when you're languishing, you might not notice the dulling of delight or the dwindling of drive. You don't catch yourself slipping slowly into solitude; you're indifferent to your indifference. When you can't see your own suffering, you don't seek help or even do much to help yourself."

Maybe a party isn't a bad idea after all. When the time comes.

Treasure's Pleasures

Wintering with his men at Port Royal in 1606, and unable to return to France, Samuel de Champlain knew his men needed more than food and rest. Their languishing *spirits* needed sustenance too.

He founded the 'Order of Good Cheer' to get them through that winter. He *ordered* them to have fun. They feasted, performed skits and plays, told stories and jokes, played games, and slept. They turned their winter 'lockdown' into one, long party.

When we languish, we're in a state of 'anhedonia'. We neglect our innate taste for pleasure the way grieving people forget to eat. One antidote, I think, is to get in touch with our 'inner hedonist', to be more deliberate in our pursuit of the pleasures that excite us. But latent Puritanism nags us.

Perhaps this is why some people love to travel abroad. It's their excuse to seek pleasure. No one back home will shake their heads at them for having fun. Maybe they can get away with it. Perhaps, for a fortnight, they can silence their 'inner nag' too.

Something in us loves a new venue, a change of climate, a party, an intense and pleasurable experience of the world, a journey we can treasure forever in memory. It doesn't have to be a flight to Cancún. It can be an inward 'trip' of the mind, can't it?

Chaucer's pilgrims, in *The Canterbury Tales*, order up their own 'good cheer'. When winter's harsh days have ended. It's time for a wild trip:

*When April with its sweet-smelling showers
Has pierced the drought of March to the root...
...then folk long to go on pilgrimages.*

For their bodily refreshment, the pilgrims gather at the Tabard Inn before they set out for the treasured shrine of Thomas à Becket. The shrine is a glittering treasure awaiting them at their journey's end, a source of *spiritual* power.

But they did not neglect the body's bawdy pleasures. Feudal folk weren't as uptight as we are about the mingling of spirit and matter. They didn't police the borders between religion and secularity, or the conjoined delights of body and soul, as secular and religious people want to do today.

I suspect our medieval ancestors understood the meaning of 'Incarnation' better than we do. They seemed to live more carefreely in its light.

Here's the real hazard, though. Today's travellers may be in danger of never *truly* experiencing the spiritual treasure they've sought so hard to see. Every day, thousands of people pack the room in the Louvre that houses 'The Mona Lisa'. Ninety-nine percent of them hold up their cameras and phones, pause just long enough to snap a selfie with Mona, and exit through the gift shop.

This behaviour touches on a deeper, stronger, and unacknowledged source of our languishing than any little Covid pandemic can do. It has something to do with our alienation from our own *selves*, the chronic discomfort of living in our own skins (our own 'incarnation'), and a blindness to the astonishing gift that life already *is*. Charles Taylor, a brilliant Canadian philosopher, calls it 'the malaise of modernity'. We're all sick with it.

Maybe the tour guides are rushing them on. Even so, have they really *seen* 'The Mona Lisa' with their naked eyes? Have they dwelt in that moment and savoured it like expensive wine? Have they truly experienced this famous painting? More than that, have they experienced *themselves* experiencing it? Or have they only had the experience of pointing a camera and clicking?

If this is how we take photos on a special pilgrimage, how bleak must our daily life be?

Mind you, there *is* a kind of tourist whose camera is truly an aid to seeing what's really there. But there's a kind of tourist, I've noticed, who uses their camera as a *proxy* for seeing what's really there. Wouldn't a poster purchased in the Gift Shop do as well or better?

Perhaps not. Perhaps I'm being too harsh and hasty. Perhaps the act of taking a photo is meant to affirm this: "*I was there.*" My taking of a photo testifies to *my* presence in a place of spiritual power and bodily rejuvenation. The photo itself is my treasure now. *It's* the reason I went on this pilgrimage.

"Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt," we jokingly say. But there's a serious side to this, even when we're not aware of it. We *do* need to bring something back with us. On our return journey, we should be carrying a treasure that will stand for the journey we've made, and our experience of it, however half-hearted it has been.

It may just be a photo in our camera, or a souvenir in our suitcase, or a solemn experience fixed forever in memory. It stands for *our* pilgrimage to a spiritually potent place and pleasure.

But much, much more than that, if we have travelled well, with our eyes wide open, we'll want it to be something that can register, or signify, the change that happened in *us* by taking that trip.

That was the point, wasn't it? A change in *us*?

They only deserve the name 'treasure' when they're tokens of our spiritually charged experience of life, talismans of our rejuvenation, and the recovery of our real selves.

Such treasures are *souvenirs*. *Souvenir* means "memory". We must remember ourselves. We must recall ourselves to the miraculous treasures that we are. Maybe *that* could be our cure for 'languishing'?

Rabbincal Ramblings

Here's a story I came upon recently. I think it speaks to this theme. It's from a book called *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* by a renowned scholar of religion from the middle of the last century, Mircea Eliade. He loved ancient cultures. Let me quote his version of this story before I go.

"A pious rabbi, Eisik of Cracow, had a dream which told him to travel to Prague. There, under the great bridge leading to the royal castle, he was to find a hidden treasure. The dream was repeated three times, and the rabbi decided to go.

"Upon arrival at Prague he found the bridge. But, as it was guarded day and night by sentinels, Eisik dared not dig. But as he continued to loiter in the vicinity, he attracted the attention of the captain of the guard, who asked him, kindly, if he had lost something. The rabbi then innocently narrated his dream.

“The officer burst into laughter. ‘Really, poor man,’ he said, ‘have you worn out your shoes coming all this way simply because of a dream?’

“This officer, too, had heard a voice in a dream: ‘It spoke to me about Cracow. It ordered me to go over there and look for a great treasure in the house of a rabbi whose name was Eisik, Eisik son of Jekel. The treasure was to be found in a dusty old corner where it had been buried behind the stove.’

“But the officer put no trust whatever in voices heard in dreams. The officer was a reasonable person.

“The rabbi, with a deep bow, thanked him and hurried back to Cracow. There he dug in the neglected corner of his house and discovered the treasure which put an end to his poverty.”

Yours in the faith,
Andrew